

# ATSA Blog

Association for the Treatment & Prevention of Sexual Abuse

Monday, July 31, 2023

## The Story of Scheherazade: A Fable for JwSO Therapists of Transformation through Care and Conversation (part 1 of 3)

By **Norbert Ralph, PhD, MPH**, Private practice, San Leandro, CA

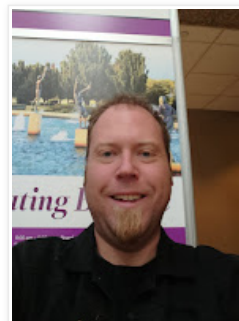
### Introduction:

Scheherazade is a character in a fable that can inform the work of therapy with juveniles who sexually offended (JwSO), what factors may contribute to change, but provides also a cautionary tale. This blog, like the fable, which is a series of stories, is told in a series of parts, each hoping to interest the reader to read more. This is the first part of a three-part blog. Each blog will provide useful information and when taken as a whole may provide some useful ideas.

### The Fable:

Scheherazade was the central figure and storyteller in "The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night" from classic Persian literature (Burton, 1885). The myth described a heroic figure who transformed a king who had done monstrous deeds by the use of care and conversation alone. In the story, a King's wife was unfaithful to him, which devastated him. The King, in response to the hurt he experienced, sought to address it by truly monstrous behavior. Every day he would marry a new virgin and then have her beheaded. He had killed a thousand women by the time that he met Scheherazade, a beautiful and learned woman who had mastered philosophy, science, the arts, and poetry. She had committed to memory 1000 stories regarding past kingdoms and adventures. Against her father's wishes, Scheherazade volunteered to marry the King, as a way to save not only the Kingdom but, even more amazingly, also the King. As a farewell favor, she asked the King if she could read him her final story before she herself was put to death. The King agreed, and listened to her story with awe regarding her grace and beauty. The story was halfway through when dawn was breaking, and she said there was no time to finish the story. So the king spared her for one day, and she not only finished the story but began a second, even more exciting tale the next day. Again, she was not able to finish the story before dawn, and again the King let her live for another day, and so this continued. At the end of a thousand and one nights, Scheherazade said she had no more tales to tell. In the process, though, the King had fallen in love with her, allowed her to live, had three sons, and was made wiser and kinder by her example of care, bravery, and the stories she told, and he made her his queen.

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## The Lesson for JwSO Therapists:

The JwSO therapist works with a teen who victimized others, often children and other adolescents. The therapist has to have faith, which to others may seem unreasonable, that the youth who has done harm to others can be transformed by care and conversation alone, or at least not recidivate. Like Scheherazade, the JwSO therapist asserts a radical idea, that not only the youth, but the "kingdom" will be safer and better because of these efforts.

The JwSO therapist, like Scheherazade, is confronted with a clear "evil" in the "Kingdom," that is an act of sexual aggression or related crimes done primarily to minors. The King's evil deed in Scheherazade presumably had a sexual component to it, in addition to murder. The JwSO youth, like the King, also had the possibility of continuing the harmful acts. The King's behavior was a reaction to his feelings of betrayal and hurt and mirrors the situation many JWSOs whose harmful acting-out behavior is also related to some trauma or life disruption.

It can be assumed that the reaction of the kingdom to the King's evil deeds was one of horror but also fear of future ongoing evil deeds. Likewise, a community's responses to a JwSO youth's crime are similar, at least in part. Sexual violence not only violates laws but is a violation of social norms, more so when the victim is a child.

Scheherazade's offer to marry the King is the opposite of what would be conventionally expected, which makes the fable so intriguing that the solution to evil deeds is caring and conversation. She offers presumably her love, and her life itself with the almost certain expectation at least from others that she will be killed. Scheherazade's idea that she can stop the evil and change the evildoer met with profound disbelief on the part of others, particularly her father. What a fantastic idea that this would be possible. Similarly, the JwSO therapist is often challenging conventional expectations that by conversation alone they can protect public safety, prevent future sexual recidivism, and assist with the transformation of this youth into a more prosocial person.

The second part of this blog will be published shortly will look at how Scheherazade transformed the King using the lens of present psychotherapeutic practices and how this parallels work with JwSO.

Posted by [SAJRT Blog](#) at 10:53 AM



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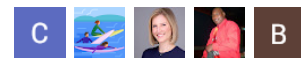
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# ATSA Blog

Association for the Treatment & Prevention of Sexual Abuse

Wednesday, August 30, 2023

## The Story of Scheherazade: A Fable for JwSO Therapists of Transformation through Care and Conversation (part 2 of 3)

By **Norbert Ralph, PhD, MPH**, Private practice, San Leandro, CA

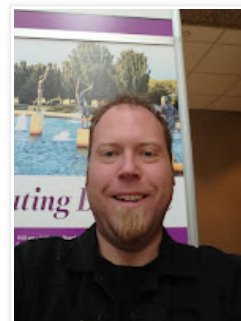
This is the second part of a three-part blog ([link to part 1 here](#)) about the Fable of Scheherazade, the central figure and storyteller in "The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night" from classic Persian literature (Burton, 1885). This second part explores if the myth gives any clues to how Scheherazade transformed the King and stopped his evil actions that parallel the work of JwSO therapists? Several factors can be hypothesized using the lens of present psychotherapeutic practices.

**Knowledge and Skill:** Scheherazade's faith that she could transform the King is one of mythology's great fables of selflessness and optimism regarding prosocial possibilities in others. Scheherazade, like the JwSO therapist, however, did not go into such a struggle with faith alone. The fable notes she was a beautiful and learned woman who was highly educated. The JwSO therapist approaches their task likewise, well-prepared with a formidable set of best practices and evidence-based methods.

**Holding Environment:** Winnicott (1960) used the term "holding environment," which has been used to describe the setting and relationship that permits the patient to experience safety and facilitates psychotherapeutic work. Scheherazade, like the JwSO therapist, created a safe setting which put implicit limits on the King's harmful behavior but without coercion and encouraged prosocial problem-solving in the context of caring conversation. It created an environment where not only the King but Scheherazade and implicitly the Kingdom were safe.

**Corrective Interpersonal Relationships:** Alexander and French discussed a therapeutic factor, the "corrective emotional experience" (Alexander & French, 1946). This referred to the idea that individuals bring into therapy dysfunctional and self-fulfilling behaviors and narratives regarding relationships. Therapy itself can provide corrective new experiences in relationships that can become a template for the patient for more positive future relationships. The King's narrative that women were unfaithful and selfish and deserve to be killed was contraindicated by Scheherazade's behavior daily for a thousand nights. Each day she survived meant one less woman killed at the risk of her own life and affirmed her belief that the King could be transformed. Like Scheherazade, the JwSO therapist's optimism about a prosocial future for the youth along with relevant knowledge and skills can become self-fulfilling when others doubt such an outcome.

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Patient Autonomy and Motivational Interviewing: Scheherazade, like the JwSO therapist, respected the autonomy and dignity of her client, the King, to find his own reasons for change. For a thousand nights, at the end of each story, Scheherazade gave the King a choice of what he wanted to do. The choice to continue a prosocial dialogue was the King's alone. Similarly, the therapist cannot "make" the JwSO youth pursue a prosocial dialogue in therapy but must give the youth the autonomy, with guidance, to find their motivation. Coercive therapy is a contradiction and an impossible idea.

Prosocial Parables: Scheherazade's stories were prosocial parables that provided information and ideas about how people could exemplify virtuous behavior, overcoming challenges, and lead more prosocial lives. Likewise, the JwSO therapist may use stories or parables as a way to teach the youth prosocial models regarding relationships and consider one more prosocial perspective or behavior to better obtain the goods of life and create a prosocial lifestyle. This was exactly the technique that Hamlet used with the play when he said, "The play's the thing Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (Shakespeare, 1603).

The third part of this blog will be published shortly will continue the discussion of look at the therapeutic aspects described in the fable through the lens of present psychotherapeutic practices. It will also discuss the therapist's identification with heroic roles while being a source of possible strength can also create vulnerabilities.

Posted by [SAJRT Blog](#) at 9:17 AM



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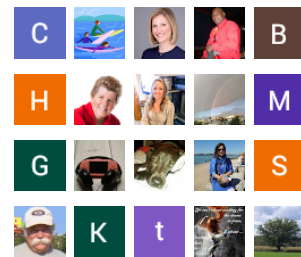
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# ATSA Blog

Association for the Treatment & Prevention of Sexual Abuse

Friday, September 22, 2023

## The Story of Scheherazade: A Fable for JwSO Therapists of Transformation through Care and Conversation (part 3 of 3)

By **Norbert Ralph, PhD, MPH**, Private practice, San Leandro, CA

(Editor's Note: Please click on the links for part 1 and part 2)

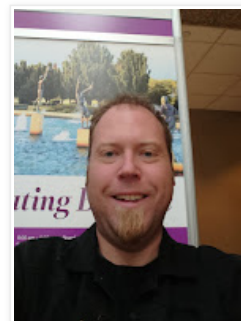
This is the third part of a three-part blog about the Fable of Scheherazade, the central figure and storyteller in "The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night" from classic Persian literature (Burton, 1885). The second part identified four therapeutic factors in the fable that parallel the work of JwSO therapists. This third part identifies additional factors and also cautions regarding overidentification with mythic heroism.

**Relapse Awareness:** For a thousand nights, Scheherazade faced the possibility that the King would "relapse" and not only kill her but continue killing other women. Presumably, this possibility would not be absent from her consciousness for a day. Likewise, the JwSO adolescent, especially those treated in the community, also has the possibility every day of committing some act of sexual aggression. JwSO therapy every week is done with awareness that the harmful behavior may recur and the importance of taking appropriate measures to prevent it.

**Curriculum and Fidelity:** Scheherazade had a series of stories, which is a lesson plan or curriculum to last a thousand nights, which was presumably implemented with fidelity. The fable notes that she had committed to memory 1000 stories regarding past kingdoms and adventures. Baglivio and colleagues (Baglivio, Wolff, Jackowski, et al., 2018) identified factors contributing to successful outcomes for residential and secure JwSO programs. Some of the factors promoting therapeutic outcomes included whether there was a structured, manualized curriculum administered with fidelity. This would contrast with an unstructured open-ended therapy relationship or a curriculum that was not faithfully implemented. A parallel between the story of Scheherazade and the work of effective JwSO therapists is a structured and faithfully implemented therapeutic curriculum. In working with this population while having a prosocial therapeutic relationship is necessary it is not sufficient. It also involves teaching knowledge, interpersonal and problem-solving skills, and practicing new behaviors both in therapy and outside, and critically reviewing results. Deficits in knowledge and skill areas may contribute to problematic sexual behaviors. In this respect, therapy is like learning Spanish. You have to learn information and practice skills, not just have a positive relationship with the teacher.

**Termination and Self-Regulation:** At some point, the JwSO therapist, like Scheherazade, expresses the faith that the youth can lead a prosocial life without a lifetime label or controls by terminating therapy. Scheherazade, at the end of

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1000 nights of storytelling, told the King she had no more stories to tell. The implicit message was that the support of the storytelling or therapy she was doing was not now necessary because of the skills and transformation of the King. While starting therapy was a profound act of optimism, also stopping and saying it is no longer needed, also represents an optimistic act but one that is realistic based on the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. Presumably, Scheherazade saw termination of therapy as a necessary part of the prosocial transformation of the King. Termination of the youth in therapy gives the message to the youth, the family, the courts, and the community that the youth is ready to construct their prosocial life. Taking responsibility for a prosocial life can be viewed as the last necessary step in treatment and that additional controls or management like sex offender registry or prolonged probation may not only be not helpful but counterproductive.

#### Discussion:

Lessons from this fable may be that there are commonalities across centuries and cultures regarding how people view the possibility of prosocial transformations of someone who has harmed others. The myth of Scheherazade was created in the ninth century with the premise that you could transform someone who had done harm to others by a conversation, relationship, and combination of skills. In that fable, the caring conversation not only promoted the prosocial transformation of the King but also impacted the Kingdom and promoted public safety and fear of ongoing evil. This is similar to the goal of the JwSO therapist who intends to promote the prosocial development of the youth and also public safety.

Most myths not only are parables to teach moral lessons about dealing with life challenges but maybe cautionary tales. Over-identification with the idea of acting heroically could lead to unwise optimism that would result in greater harm. The therapist can become so identified with heroic goals that they may ignore the dangers and negative possibilities. Joseph Wheelwright (1971), a Jungian analyst and teacher in the Bay Area, talked about how therapists should be cautious about "channeling" mythic images, such as the White Knight riding in to save others. The therapist who over-identifies with the hero's quest, and ignores realities, may end up like Don Quixote, in folly and misadventure, and worse, tragedy.

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